



Bracknell Forest: Reviewing our IAS Service and planning for the future

Bracknell Forest is one of 6 unitary authority areas within Berkshire in southern England and is in the main a very affluent area and host to many high-tech companies. It has a population of more than 120,000 and an estimated 26% of which is aged between 0 – 19 years. There are 692 education, health and care (EHC) plans with almost 38% attending special school provision.

Bracknell Forest Parent Partnership Service was first established in 1999, with one part-time member of staff. Since the Children and Families Act (2014) was introduced, Bracknell Forest IAS Service has grown and developed.

Funding from the Information Advice and Support (IAS) programme has supported the development of the IAS Service so it can provide free, impartial information, advice and support to Bracknell Forest children/young people and their parents/carers about matters relating to SEND. It aims to engage as much as possible with children and young people directly. Every service user should feel empowered by being provided with relevant information, advice and support, enabling them to make informed decisions. By analysing service user feedback and reflecting on best practice the service continually makes improvements and evolves.

Over the years, demand for the IAS Service has continued to grow via word of mouth and awareness raising efforts. The funding has allowed the service to expand capacity by employing additional staff; currently three part-time staff members are employed.

The challenge

The IAS Service experienced a rise in demand for its services since 2014 as well as an increase in complex, time consuming cases. One challenge is to continue to respond to all service users in a timely fashion whilst continuing other duties, such as raising awareness, attending charity group meetings, Parent Carer Forum meetings, training courses and spending time on service development and reporting. Roles have been reorganised so the administrator can take/triage calls to the IAS Service. This helps keep to the timescale of responding to service users within 48 hours. There are two members of staff working a job share to oversee the service and do the casework. The additional staff has allowed the time and ability to reflect on service gaps and development of the service itself. The plan is to employ a fourth member of staff in the next financial year to help with the increasing demand.

Another challenge is to encourage children/young people to access the service in their own right. Although significant steps have been taken to try to raise awareness of the service amongst these groups including meeting and liaising with various youth services, uptake is still low so more needs to be done. The plan is to employ a Children/Young Person Case officer in the next financial year to dedicate their time to this service user group and to enable the service to be fully compliant and fulfil its remit.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

Funding through the IAS programme has enabled the service to add capacity through two additional staff members; an Administrator and Job share Senior IAS Service Co-ordinator. Having these staff members has enabled it to keep up with service demand, whilst allowing time to fully review the service and to strategically plan for the future. The additional staff has allowed time to be dedicated to regularly feedback to the local SEN team; to make more factsheets and resource packs to support service users; to support local charity coffee events and the local Parent Carer Forum.

The IAS programme set and supported a task to conduct a self-review on the current service. This enabled the service to consider its current offer in light of the SEND Code of Practice and minimal standards. This included allocating time to meet with professionals and service users to gain their feedback.

The IAS Service was able to raise its profile within the local authority (LA) by sharing its self-review feedback with LA commissioners and discussing the plans for the future. The self-review exercise identified the gaps in the service and areas to develop and then making a detailed plan to address this over the next two years. This included how the IAS service will be widening its remit to work with more children/young people; become jointly-commissioned, develop a stand-alone website; take on budget management and be seen outwardly as being impartial by being located in a building separate from the main LA building. It is a huge benefit to the service to have conducted such a thorough self-review and have a clear operational plan on how to be fully compliant with the new minimum standards. The service has developed smaller steps to achieve these goals and the plans have been agreed and supported by the LA.

The self-review exercise helped to both raise IAS Service profile and to form new relationships. For example, the self-review provided a forum to meet with members of the SEN team, other LA services and local charities and parent groups and have frank discussions about the service; its strengths and areas requiring further development. The service also met more regularly with senior management to discuss and share the planning work. Also relationships have been established with the LA finance team in preparation to take on budget management. Relationships are also progressing with Social Care teams and Health in preparing the groundwork for becoming a jointly commissioned service. Finally the IAS Service is starting to grow a well-attended steering group.

Impact to service beneficiaries

The IAS Service is more confident about the future because of having a clear plan supported by the LA. The planning will benefit the service users because there will be more resources available for them, more capacity to respond to their enquiries, a more informative website and a new staff member dedicated to children and young people.

Lessons learnt

The self-review exercise highlighted that many service users and professionals highly valued the service but it was not well known enough within Bracknell Forest. Whilst doing much to raise awareness, it is an area that needs to be continually worked on. The self-review provided a focus on what more the service could consider doing. This helped create a volunteer project, which among other things would help with raising awareness. A volunteer has been found who is willing to support the service to distribute leaflets e.g. to local libraries, doctors surgeries, Children's Centres. The plan is for the volunteer project to grow and to add capacity to the existing team.

The self-review also highlighted that the service is not always considered by professionals as impartial and seemingly no amount of policies and good practice can change this; a physical change of location and address is needed. This enabled the service to agree in principle to a move out of the main LA office building and provided the evidence needed (along with the minimum standards) to support the requirement for a move.

The self-review also highlighted that despite the efforts that had been made, children and young people are rarely accessing the service themselves identifying the need and subsequent plan for a new dedicated role to address this.

How is the approach being sustained?

Through the IAS Service self-review and operational planning the LA now has a better understanding of the service and its future plans. Arrangements are in place to keep the LA up to date and the service has been invited to speak at a senior management meeting. The LA is supporting the implementation of the service plans. Plans are afoot to develop the steering group who will also be able to support the service going forward. In addition there is a close relationship with the local Parent Carer Forum who also support the service.

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<https://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/children-and-family-services/special-educational-needs/information-advice-and-support-service>